

The record of the U.S.S. SUWANNEE, a SANGAMON class escort carrier, lends ample proof to the oft-heard claim that she is one of the most outstanding and toughest CVE's afloat. The list of victories in which she has had a part reads like a chronicle of the Navy's progress in World War II.

Fresh out of the yards, a large fleet tanker converted to a carrier, the SUWANNEE distinguished herself in her first taste of battle during the landings at Casablanca in Africa. There she became the first American carrier to sink a German submarine. But Casablanca was only the beginning. The travels of the SUWANNEE thereafter took her to the Pacific and a part in virtually every invasion that helped blast the way to Tokyo. Among them were the actions at Guadalcanal, Russell Islands, New Georgia, the Gilberts (including Tarawa), Kwajalein, Eniwetok, Palau, Aitape, Hollandia, Saipan, Tinian, Guam, Morotai, the famous Battle of Leyte Gulf and finally Okinawa and Balikpapan. With that impressive list of battle stripes, it is believed that the SUWANNEE holds a record for participation in Pacific conquests that no other CVE can equal.

It was during the thunderous battle off the shores of Leyte in October, 1944 that the SUWANNEE acquired the dubious distinction of becoming the victim for the first use of suicide planes by the Japanese. She was hit by two of them and suffered severe damage with numerous casualties. Not for long was she out of action, however, for after undergoing repair and overhaul at the Puget Sound Navy Yard in Bremerton and taking aboard a new complement of flyers, Air Group 40, she came back to the far Pacific for what proved to be the toughest job of her career---Okinawa.

The ship's war bonnet was already a well-decorated headpiece but by far the brightest feather in it was destined to be that marking the Okinawa campaign. Fittingly enough, she sortied from Ulithi's huge anchorage shortly after many members of her crew had been decorated for heroism in the Battle of Leyte Gulf during a ceremony on the flight deck. The ship was not long in the open sea before the Commanding Officer, Captain Delbert S. Cornwell, USN, of Philippi, West Virginia, informed the crew over the ship's general announcing system that an invasion, only 325 brief miles from Japan, was their destination. Little did anyone anticipate then the three-month long grind that was to ensue.

With a pre-dawn flight on Easter Sunday, April 1, the SUWANNEE started the Okinawa operation in the traditional role of the CVE's---lending air support to the ground troops. But it was but a few days before it became apparent that the real task of Carrier Division 22 and the SUWANNEE was to be the neutralization of enemy airfields. Her planes flew more sorties and trucked more TNT over to Jap installations than any other CVE Air Group had ever done. And finally, she established a new mark for ruggedness by remaining in continuous combat operation for 82 days.

During that three-month marathon, it has been estimated that Carrier Division 22 pilots flew almost 12,000 sorties. Of that total, SUWANNEE's air group contributed 3,273, while amassing more than 10,000 hours in the air. Lt. Commander J.C. Longino, Jr., Air Group Commander, of Fairburn, Ga., led the squadron with 271.4 hours of flight time. In the large number of strike missions carried out by the air group, 495 tons of bombs were dropped on the enemy and 6, 176 rockets were launched. How well all that TNT paid off in the destruction of airfields and grounded planes is best indicated by the fact that the Jap air forces attacking Okinawa came not from the Sakishima group

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Shortly after the war started, Sumsunee was decommissioned and rebuilt as escort carrier CVE 27.

D-day in North Africa on 8 Nov 1942, saw Sumsunee's torpedo bombers sink a Vichy-French submarine, and her fighter-bombers support ground troops. When the beachhead had been established, Sumsunee was ordered back across the Atlantic for transfer to the Pacific Fleet.

During the next two years, she took part in many Pacific actions, including the Battle of Guadalcanal and engagements off Palau, Aitape, Hollandia, Saipan, Guam and Morotai.

Beginning on 20 Oct 1944, Sumsunee supplied air support for ground forces operating on Leyte Island, and her fighters made sweeps against the western Visayan Islands and northern Mindanao.

It was during the Battle for Leyte Gulf on 25-26 Oct 1944, that Sumsunee was hit. Her planes attacked the enemy's central force of battleships, cruisers and destroyers as it moved through the Visayan Islands from the northwest.

The Japanese pushed through the San Bernardino Straits, and Sumsunee and her sister CVEs were the only ships in position to stop them from disrupting newly acquired beachheads.

The carriers retired, but kept launching strikes. After a furious two-hour engagement on 26 October, the Japanese force turned and headed for home, leaving several cruisers and destroyers on the bottom.

Sumsunee was hit by two Japanese suicide planes, the first of which had a 500-pound bomb attached. Seconds after the second kamikaze crashed into the

flight deck elevator, another enemy plane dropped a 500-pound bomb which exploded among the planes on the flight deck.

But after repairs at Paget Sound, she returned to the Western Pacific, her planes flying hundreds of sorties in the Okinawa area.

After a short time with the occupation forces in Japan, the Navy again decommissioned her in Boston. ~~and~~

Sumner earned 11 Battle Stars and the Presidential Unit Citation for her Pacific service, and one Battle Star for her part in the North African campaign.

For the periods 2 Sep 1945 - 24 Oct 1945, and 18-24 Dec 1945, Sumner earned the Navy Occupation Service Medal, Asia. -- Ed.